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Review

JEREMIAD FOR DIXIE

Southern Jews felt a duty to the region that adopted them

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Rosen, Robert N. *The Jewish Confederates*. University of South Carolina Press, 2000-10-01. \$39.95 ISBN 1570033633

Conjure up an image of Johnny Reb marching into battle and it is unlikely that the picture of a Jewish soldier will emerge. Indeed, raise the subject of Jews in the Confederacy at all and the conversation will begin, and most likely end, with Judah P. Benjamin. And yet, in this very important new book, Robert N. Rosen, author of two previous histories of Charleston, South Carolina, reminds us that religion and ethnicity are the twin towers of neglect in the study of the Civil War.

The publication of **The Jewish Confederates** is particularly timely. Since the naming of Joseph Lieberman as the Democratic vice presidential nominee, the topic of Jews within the fabric of American history has received renewed attention. In an earlier generation, Rabbi Bertram W. Korn and Jacob Radar Marcus pioneered the study of southern and Civil War Jewish history, yet few scholars, with the exception of those who wrote localized studies, followed Korn's and Marcus's impressive example on any grand scale. All scholars of the Civil War era thus will be beholden to Rosen for this reminder that new inquiry still can be pursued successfully in this subject.

During the Civil War, southern Jewish families not only supported the Confederacy, but they did so, in some cases, with a depth of commitment that would be the envy of Ashley Wilkes! Most had arrived in America only in the 1840s and 1850s. Yet in their new homeland, Jews were able to reconcile their yearly Passover celebration of the Exodus from Egypt with their support for the Confederate States of America and its institution of slavery. Struck by the freedom they now enjoyed in their new country, the recent immigrants from Bavaria, Prussia, and Central Europe repaid that gift with patriotic fervor and a

dedication to the cause second to none.

Interestingly enough, while there was anti-Semitism in the Old South, there was remarkably little in the armies of Robert E. Lee and Joseph Johnston, or in the executive offices of Jefferson Davis. The same, of course, cannot be said about the Union army, where both Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman issued flagrantly anti-Jewish orders and proclamations. "Although there were anti-Jewish outbursts in the South during the war," writes Rosen, "the Confederate South was, contrary, to popular belief, the exact opposite of the image of the Old South held by most contemporary Americans."

Few Jewish Confederate soldiers owned slaves, so for them the War was not necessarily about slavery. Indeed, most were poor clerks, peddlers, artisans, tailors, shopkeepers, and petty merchants who not only did not own slaves, but held little hope that they ever would. Coming from the German states, some Jewish soldiers even privately condemned the peculiar institution, but openly they acknowledged little disagreement with prevailing views on race and slavery.

Why, then, did they fight? The primary reason seems to be a sense of duty. "It was the cardinal belief of anti-Semites and others in the nineteenth century," writes Rosen, "that 'the Wandering Jew' was citizen of no country, that they were cowards and they were disloyal." Thus, the author adds, "many a Jewish soldier enlisted to prove he was a man and a worthy citizen." Moreover, active involvement in the Confederacy, Jews believed, would facilitate their deep desire to be assimilated into southern society.

Profiling both the prominent and the humble who volunteered for the Confederacy, Rosen relates the experiences of officers, enlisted men, businessmen, politicians, nurses, rabbis, and doctors. Judah Benjamin is included, of course, but so are less familiar names such as Colonel Abraham C. Myers, quartermaster general of the Confederacy; Major Adolph Proskauer of the 125th Alabama; Major Alexander Hart of the 5th Louisiana; and Phoebe Levy Pember, the matron of Richmond's Chimborazo Hospital. There is mention also of Benjamin Franklin Jonas of Fenner's Battery, who after the War was sent to the U.S. Senate by Louisiana to lead its fight against Reconstruction and, in so doing, became the first practicing Jew to sit in the Senate. There are many other Jewish Johnny Rebs included who fought in infantry, cavalry, and artillery units in every major campaign.

A review of this length cannot adequately convey Rosen's hard work in examining the Jewish communities of the Confederate South. Most readers would assume that the focal points for a study such as this would be Charleston, Savannah, and Richmond. Although there were indeed many Jewish soldiers from South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia, the typical "Hebrew" or "Isrlite" soldiers, as they called themselves, actually were German-speaking immigrants from Louisiana, a state that was home to approximately one-third of all Jews in the South in 1861.

Even for those confident that they already understand the War, this is a work that will dispel common misconceptions about the Confederacy, its leadership and soldiers, and its Jewish population. Generously illustrated, **The Jewish Confederates** will be used and discussed for a long time to come - and no book can, or should, aspire to any higher accolade.

Jason H. Silverman is professor of history at Winthrop University and a former South Carolina Professor of the Year. Author of many works on the Civil War, his latest book is a forthcoming biography of General Nathan "Shanks" Evans.